

Torah Stitch by Stitch – Genesis 2:22-25

Stitched by Karen Chisvin – May 2013 – November 2013

Why I am participating in this project

Among other things, I enjoy Torah study, needlework, and collaborative projects. When Temma introduced me to this project, it seemed like a great opportunity to understand Torah in a completely different way from traditional text study. I imagined that in the course of stitching my verses, I would muse and meditate upon them. It was also a chance to practice a traditional stitching form that I haven't practiced since I was a child. This would be a wonderful opportunity to be part of a collaborative needlework project – a bee – where the affordances of modern communication and technology let participants work anywhere any time and still be party of a large common whole. Finally, I have needleworkers in my family's past, among them: Great-grandmother Chana with the "Golden Hands." Great-grandmother Leah who could make a sewing pattern after a glance at a ready-made garment, Bubie Sadie who could needlepoint with precision and knit with a consistent gauge and tension day after day, Zaida Max who mentored my sewing, and my mother Phyllis whose earliest work I recall is a winter sweater with the image of a skater stitched into it.

Where I have done my stitching



I received my package of text, needle, thread, and Aida cloth in May 2013. Though confident in my ability to read the chart, there was still something daunting about committing to the first stitch! I took my package with me to Barcelona in June and it pleased me to know that I was bringing Torah to a city that hosted The Disputation at Barcelona where Nachmanides' successful defence of Judaism led to his exile from that city. While I did not do any stitching yet, I did purchase the first palette of embellishment colours at the Cortes Ingles department store, a short walk from the old Jewish quarter of town. I also considered that Gaudi's decorative work might be an inspiration for embellishment when I finally got to that point.



In July I did take my package to our family cottage on Lake of Bays. On weekends when I was alone, I was productive, and found that stitching became very meditative. I became intrigued by trying to find the best path to complete each letter – especially the alephs and the shins. I'm not sure that I quite succeeded even by the end of the panel. I also realized that with some of our afghans, throw cushions, and wall hangings

about the cottage, I was surrounded by the handiwork of my grandmother (knitting and needlepoint), my mother (needlepoint at several scales), great-aunt (knitting). I took the picture on the dock, but I did all the stitching indoors with this view so as not to lose a needle in the lake!

Somehow after a good stint of stitching, other things intervened and I found myself on hiatus. So, I packed my kit and took it along on a trip to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Even the streets of Singapore admonished me:



And stitch I did. An air-conditioned room was a good place of refuge from the humidity of the city.

Again, I brought Torah to a place of few Jews – though there are two synagogues. I did track down a store to purchase the right brand of embroidery floss for embellishment and so I bought the second flight of colours there.



From Singapore my travels took me to Kuala Lumpur. No synagogues, and no permanent Jews. It is a place of building activity and people on the move. And a city with an inspiring textile collection at the Islamic Arts Museum.

I made pretty good headway on this trip and it seemed to keep me motivated to devote the necessary time to complete the text once I got home.



Embellishing the text

I finally finished the text, with only a few gnarled threads to unpick along the way and only one letter to completely re-do. Each tangle or error was a sign to set the work aside for another session. Then I set about planning my embellishments. Some of my early ideas were to seek inspiration from the text itself and/or from images from my travels. And then I recalled that I had photographs of two ends of a piece – a towel? – that my great-grandmother Leah stitched and that her grand-daughter, my cousin Lynne, conserves. I remembered that work was embroidered, but that was it. So I looked up the pictures and discovered that this presumptive trousseau work was done in black and red cross-stitch. She would have made it in Belarus and brought it with her to Canada.

Whether it was made before or after she was betrothed I do not know, but I would place its making before the birth of her eldest child in 1898.



I decided to adapt this design to the width of the TSBS panel and use the official palette to create a more graphic effect with the black text. I decided not to correct all of my graphed transcription errors or all of my stitched errors. I created a 5-swag design from the 4 that Leah used, and let my greenery trail up into the empty space at the end of my last verse.

To do this, I began by penciling a grid over a print of the Leah's work. And then I photocopied the bottom portion of my official chart. Using coloured pencils that approximated the colours I intended, I charted one combination of flowers and leaves. I worked the scallops at the bottom adjusting the stitch count to accommodate a warp thread rather than stitch is in the middle of the panel



Finally, in honour of all of those – not only in my family – with “Golden Hands” I pay homage to them with the little yellow hamsas I inserted at the bottom of the panel between the scallops.

I purchased extra needles so that I could thread several floss colours at time and I purchased almost all of the colours in both palettes.



As I submit my panel, I am including two of the unused skeins of floss and one pack of

needles, and I hope that they will find themselves stitched into someone else's panel.

As I packed up the work to hand back to the project, I took another look at the text of the verses after ignoring them for a while. I was pleased that the text was about the creation of woman from the flesh and bones of man, and pleased as well to note that it was part of my daughter's bat mitzvah portion. But once I decided that the design of the embellishment would come from outside the text, I stopped examining it. So, looking again I find it most appropriate to think of my great-grandmother stitching her flowers and vines in anticipation of marriage.

“Thread is dear”



Part way through the project I started to think of Five Little Peppers and How they Grew. All I could recall of the book was the family's cheerful poverty, the stitching, and the rescue of basting threads: "Thread is dear." All along I'd been keeping my snipped bits in a bag – mostly for the convenience of keeping my workspace tidy. These threads may be used again – but that's another project!

Project hours: approximately 30 hours for the text; another 25 – 30 for the embellishment included transcription of design, some colour sampling, hamsa design